

Music in His Own Image: The Aphex Twin Face.

By Peter David Mathews

Beyond the dark, intense vision of his music, a further disturbing dimension of Aphex Twin's project is illuminated by his video clips. In particular, his two most famous videos, "Come to Daddy" and "Windowlicker," are the fruit of collaborations with director Chris Cunningham; awards for "Come to Daddy" first brought both these artists into the mainstream eye in 1997. The outstanding feature of these clips is undoubtedly the face of Richard D. James. James, the man behind the Aphex Twin pseudonym, stares mockingly at the viewer, inevitably flashing his trademark leer. The unsettling characteristic of this smile is how the lips are stretched to the point of exaggeration. The initial impression of a broad, cheerful smile is quickly replaced by a feeling of incipient unease.

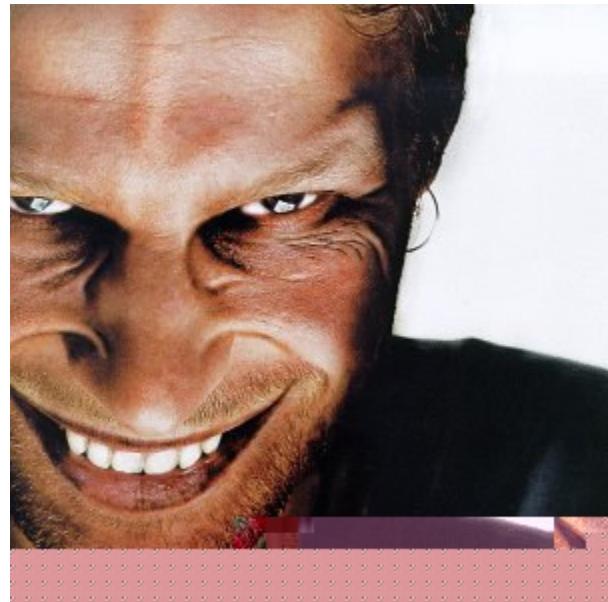


Figure 1: Cover of Aphex Twin's Richard D. James Album

James's grin becomes an inverted grimace, the tension of which is clearly visible in the creases around his eyes, nose and forehead. The look imbues these images with an intensity embellished by the fact that James's expression never changes.

The initial impact of this look is augmented and intensified in several ways. The most obvious is through a process of multiplication. In each Aphex Twin clip, the secondary actors take on the face of their Creator. “Come to Daddy,” for instance, opens with an old woman walking her dog in a grimy, industrial setting. The dog urinates on an abandoned television lying on the sidewalk, causing it to sputter unexpectedly into life. This unleashes a demon spirit from the set, accompanied by a set of minions that constitute the verminous inhabitants of these abandoned buildings. The minions are made up of what appears, at first glance, to be a band of small children; their faces, however, have been replaced by Aphex Twin masks.



Figure 2: Still from “Come to Daddy”

These masks unsettle the viewer in two further ways. As a mask, this borrowed expression is frozen on the children’s faces. Like their master, the children’s faces are distorted by the eternal grimace/grin of the Aphex Twin. The second feature lies in the uncanny juxtaposition of childhood (with its societal implications of innocence) and the sneering lack of innocence implied by this smile (a contrast that is recycled to great effect in “Donkey Rhubarb,” for instance, in which giant teddy bears with Aphex Twin faces dance and play with a group of children).

The motif is repeated in a new and varied way in “Windowlicker”. Whereas “Come to Daddy” transgresses the division between childhood and adulthood, “Windowlicker” plays with the shifting boundaries of gender. This motif was established before the video,

however: the face of Richard D. James appears on the album cover superimposed onto the body of a woman wearing a white bikini.



Figure 3: Cover of Aphex Twin's Windowlicker

The “Windowlicker” video opens with two young men in a convertible who, with a surreal mixture of cursing and preening, try unsuccessfully to entice two women standing by the side of the road to join them for sex. After several minutes of this interaction, the convertible is pushed out of sight by an extraordinarily long limousine. The limousine’s length is clearly a hyperbolic, phallic retort to the posturing of the two men. The window rolls down, revealing, of course, the grinning face of the Aphex Twin. The women, seduced by his antics, are transformed in a flash of light. The camera cuts to James in the back of the limousine, a woman on each arm, the Aphex Twin grin overlaid on their faces.

The materialization of the Aphex Twin undercuts the mechanisms of desire that are normally at work in this kind of video. Chris Cunningham himself has said that the clip was meant to be a parody of the stereotypical sexism underlying many mainstream R&B

and rap videos. But what makes it so effective, in this instance, is the way “Windowlicker” undermines the desire of the viewer from the inside out. The sources it is aiming to parody are mechanistic in their evocation of desire, and Cunningham makes cunning, subversive use of these stereotypical techniques. For instance, the figure of the singer is typically placed at the center of the screen, and is clearly meant to be the viewer’s object of desire. The artist is, above all, the fetishized object of this ritual, yet it is important to note not only that this fetish is disavowed, but also how and why. For instance, one of the recurring features of this genre is the redundancy of the artist’s exhibitionism. In a calculated display of self-reference, the artist attempts to impress their name or image into the mind of the viewer or listener through the technique of calculated repetition. In the music, singers will often carefully highlight their name by inserting it into the lyrics of the song. This redundancy is translated into every manifestation of the artist, who becomes a fetish object by virtue of this manufactured ubiquity. Redundancy is designed to ensure that the image of the artist will be saturated in the viewer’s mind, so that the viewer will not only come away with a song in their head but a complete (but ultimately distant and unattainable) object of desire. The absence of lyrics in “Windowlicker” only further underlines its irony from this perspective.

Nonetheless, Cunningham satirically overcompensates for this verbal lack by putting the Aphex Twin through the motions of visual fetishization. His presence is diffused throughout the diegetic space of the video clip like a puzzling odor. The beginning of the clip, for instance, shows the symbol of what appears to be an arrow. This symbol, it turns out, is the signature emblem of the Aphex Twin. The symbol is composed, it would seem, from the initials AT (there is a small indentation on the right side of the middle line that suggests the letter A),¹ although there is little doubt that the viewer’s probable initial interpretation, in which this symbol is taken for an arrow, is a calculated effect. This symbol is part of a cunning, parodic exercise in redundancy and self-reference.

¹ This is the symbol that Aphex Twin has repeatedly used as his logo throughout his work, and when seen in a less ambiguous light than the still, it is clear that the symbol is meant to represent the Aphex Twin initials.



Figure 4: Still from “Windowlicker”

It gradually becomes clear, as “Windowlicker” progresses, that this symbol is the logo of the Aphex Twin himself. Not only does it appear at the beginning of the clip, but it reappears on the side of the limousine, on the umbrella of the Aphex Twin, and again on the dancers that will later appear to accompany him. Its most important appearance is in the shot with the dancers, who form a circle with these umbrellas. The camera observes from above, allowing the viewer to see the pattern thus formed. The meaning of this ring is manifold. Firstly, the multiplication of umbrellas (there is originally only one) indicates the proliferation of the Aphex Twin identity. The logo suggests, as with the masks on the dancers, that the Aphex Twin has permeated the musical and cinematic landscape. Secondly, the circular formation further highlights the redundancy of this act: the dancers’ loop suggests a circle of infinite iteration and self-reference. Finally, in contrast to this display of redundancy, the arrangement of the symbols suggests an element of chaos and disorder. Within the perfect circle created by the dancers, the arrows are pointed in random directions, and this lack of formation brings together the forces of order and disarray into a single posture.

The clip is thus an exercise in diffusion, starting from the fleeting glimpse of the Aphex Twin logo at the outset of the video, and multiplying his image until the cinematic space is populated by these doubles. But there is a further critique of desire at work in this clip that again parodies the fetishization of the artist. The primary rhetoric of Cunningham’s caricature stems from his use of hyperbole, such as the stream of overdone African-American vernacular, the enormously phallic limousine, and the patently absurd dance scenes. But underlying this rhetoric is a second, much darker, visual grammar. The function of the fetish, of course, is seduction, and Cunningham once again plays with the

rules of the genre. Repeating the motif from the album cover, Cunningham's superimposition of James's face is an exercise in perversity. Where "Come to Daddy" showed the fascination of horror, "Windowlicker" shows the horror of fascination. It is impossible for the viewer to avoid trying to decode Cunningham's visual grammar of desire according to the usual rules. The viewer's gaze is inevitably arrested by the cynically sexualized postures of the women, only to recoil at the sight of their hideously grinning masks. Cunningham is thus able to forge a recurring link between desire (using the most mechanical and derisive evocation possible) and disgust.



Figure 5: Still from "Windowlicker"

This culminates in the clip's most grotesquely decadent scene, in which the Aphex Twin sprays a line of cavorting, masked dancers with champagne. By this time even the masks of the dancer have mutated, their skin shriveled and stretched, the grins accentuated by a set of large, dirty teeth. Cunningham carefully decorates these images of degradation with fresh flowers in order to complete the juxtaposition.

While dissecting the "Windowlicker" video clip is a fascinating task in itself, one that reveals much about the aesthetic behind the Aphex Twin project, a new twist in its interpretation has come to light two years after the video's release. According to an article by Leander Kahney, a musician named Chaos Machine discovered in 2001 that the sound patterns at the end of "Windowlicker," when viewed through a sound editing program, form what appears to be the face of a "demon".

It seems to have been discovered accidentally by an electronic musician who calls himself Chaos Machine. Chaos Machine wasn't available for an interview, but according

to his website, he was playing around with WinAmp one evening when he spotted the diabolical face.

His discovery can be reproduced with a sample of the song and some spectrographic software, which displays the different frequencies of the song as a graph against time (Kahney). The experiment was repeated by Jarmo Niinisalo, who discovered that there was indeed a face contained in the musical waves.

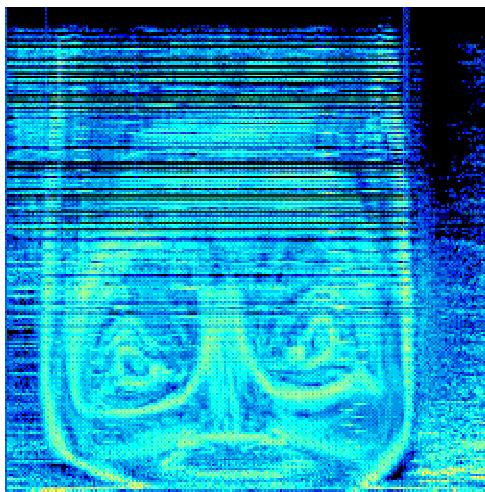


Figure 6: Chaos Machine's "demon face"

But Niinisalo went further than Chaos Machine in this discovery. He writes: "While examining the image, I came to the conclusion that something was not right. So I started messing around with the settings of the spectrograph program, and after a bit of knob twiddling the mystery revealed itself: the face was supposed to be watched with a *logarithmic* frequency scale, not with a linear scale. A linear scale provided the "demon face," but with a logarithmic scale the end results were quite different" (Niinisalo).

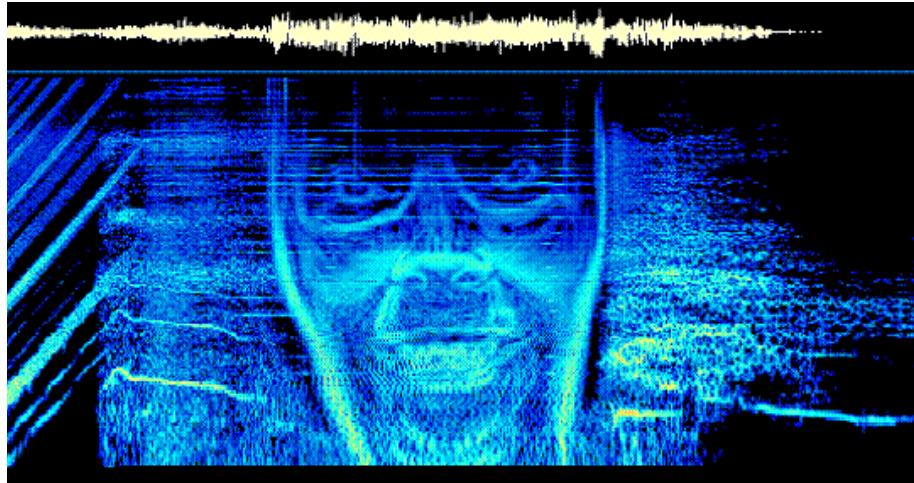


Figure 7: The Aphex Twin face

Given its recurrent appearance in Aphex Twin's work, it perhaps comes as no surprise that the face turns out to be a somewhat distorted (but nonetheless unmistakable) image of a grinning Richard D. James.

The possibility of transforming images into sound, and vice versa, is a product of the electronic age. The standard formats for image and sound files use essentially the same technique for storing information. Bitmap files, for example, reproduce pictures by storing every individual, microscopic dot of a recorded image. Each dot is an individualized point of representation. Given the computer's capacity for containing large amounts of detailed information, bitmaps provide the highest image quality possible. Wave files work in the same way, storing each individual recorded pitch. The computer, in other words, has traversed the separation of music and image central to Schopenhauer's dichotomy. Because images and music are now stored in the same way, the only thing that determines their form is how they are interpreted.

As Niinisalo points out, transformations from image into sound are relatively easy to detect (from my own experiments, the common characteristic seems to be a machine-like white noise). Niinisalo's investigations do not end with the Aphex Twin face. Not only does he discover several other examples of image to sound transformation on the

Windowlicker CD, but also another instance of its use on Plaid's "3recurring," the aural representation of a repeated series of threes. Although the sound-image connection has rarely been used because of its "unmusical" properties, it is nonetheless fascinating to trace this musical moment, the first known entry of this technique into avant-garde electronic music. Furthermore, Niinisalo's revelations about the Aphex Twin face surely add a new, important dimension to the interpretation of James's music. Beyond the clever use of masks across the range of Aphex Twin video clips, the Windowlicker sound-image surpasses itself as an exercise in hyperbole. Transcending a cultural tradition of inexplicable mystical transformation, whether divine (the Word made flesh) or scientific (alchemy's dream of transforming lead into gold), James succeeds, miraculously, in creating music in his own image.

Works Cited

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http://www.bastwood.com/?cat=projects&subcat=html&viewproject=aphex_face

Image Credits

Fig 1. Elektra/Asylum, 1997.

Fig 2. Wea Corp, 2003.

Fig 3. Sire/Wea, 1999.

Fig 4. Wea Corp, 2003.

Fig 5. Wea Corp, 2003.

Fig 6. Jarmo Niinisalo, 2004.

Fig 7. Jarmo Niinisalo, 2004.